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SUBJECT: MOROCCO'S NEW ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMISSION STARTS TO  
TAKE SHAPE

Classified By: Economic Counselor Stuart Smith, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: Morocco's long-promised Central Commission to Combat Corruption is finally starting to take shape following King Mohammed VI's August 21st appointment of local Transparency International co-founder Abdesselam Aboudrar to head the entity. Aboudrar told us in a September 10 meeting that he shares the NGO community's concerns about the commission's lack of independence and purely "preventive" role, but intends to use the U.N. anti-corruption convention as his guide and seek to advance a "national system of integrity." Corruption has increased under the present king's reign, he said, due to openness and a drop in the "fear factor." As a result of the increasing scope of the problem, he judged that there is the "political willingness" both in government and civil society to tack le it. The commission, he predicted, will be up and running by the end of the year. Aboudrar has appointed a deputy and is now seeking additional staff and office space. He looked forward to cooperation with the USG, and expressed interest in USAID's ongoing work to assess the state of corruption in Morocco. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Econ Counselor and USAID Deputy Director met on September 10 with Abdessalem Aboudrar, the newly-designated head of Morocco's Central Commission to Combat Corruption. The Commission, which is formally attached to the Prime Minister's office, is intended to serve as a central coordinating entity on anti-corruption policy. It will have responsibility for collecting and disseminating information relating to corruption, sensitizing the public, and monitoring progress in implementing the recently ratified UN Convention against corruption. Abdourar explained the commission's complicated organizational structure, which includes a plenary assembly, an executive commission, and a secretariat. The assembly, he said, will include representatives of all concerned government entities, as well as of civil society and non-governmental organizations. It will meet twice a year to review developments and approve commission reports and recommendations. An executive commission, which Aboudrar will also head, will include key stakeholders and meet more regularly. Finally, the secretariat will provide staff support for the other entities. Aboudrar indicated he was given a free hand in selecting his staff, and has asked Rabha Zeidguy, the Director of the Modernization of the Bureaucracy at the Ministry for the Modernization of the Public Sector, to serve as the commission's secretary-general.

3. (U) The complicated structure and limited mandate has been

questioned by Morocco's leading anti-corruption non-governmental organization, Transparency Maroc (TM), as well as a number of members of Parliament. TM's President, Rachid Filali Meknassi, noted in a recent press interview that the organization's reservations about the commission stemmed largely from the fact that it is a "consultative organ" rather than an investigatory one: "It can become either a center for intelligence on the subject of corruption, or an alibi to say that one is doing something about the problem," he said. He added, however, that Aboudrar, another of TM's co-founders, has precisely the "profile" needed to tackle the issue, and was thus an excellent choice. The broader questions about the commission are shared in Parliament, where Habib Choubani, President of the Justice Commission, this week convoked the Minister for the Modernization of the Public Sector, Mohammed Abou, to discuss the problem of corruption in the state bureaucracy, as well as the process by which the Corruption Commission has been instituted.

14. (C) Aboudrar, who is himself a founding member of Transparency Maroc, as well as head of the Moroccan Confederation of Enterprises' anti-corruption committee, told us he shares these concerns about the Commission's mandate and independence. "I would have preferred a more independent structure," he said, as well as a role that extended beyond prevention of corruption to its "repression." He argued, however, that the fact that "it is not clear what we can do" will give the entity the ability to push the envelope and engage in greater activism as it fills its mandate of advising the government on corruption issues.

15. (C) Aboudrar noted that civil society is fully committed to the anti-corruption effort, and that there is a "political willingness to engage on the issue." He attributed the year and a half delay in setting up the Instance to the transition between the Jettou and El Fassi governments. Jettou, he opined, was ready to act, but preferred to leave the nomination to the succeeding government, to avoid the impression that it was the initiative of a lame duck administration. He speculated, however, that the delay also resulted from the continuing "reticence of the executive in Morocco to surrender its prerogatives," a reflection of the fact that the country is not a "full democracy" in any sense.

16. (C) Abdoudrar stressed that a re-moralization of public life in Morocco is essential. The government has an ambitious plan, he noted, but the commission will not simply be its spokesperson as it seeks to implement it. "I am more ambitious than that," he said, and "will use the UN convention as a guide." He argued Morocco is in urgent need of a "national system of integrity," to instill a new sense of civic responsibility. He noted that he had pressed for and received a six-year mandate for his work, which will render him independent of any legislative calendar, and of the mandate of the PM who appointed him. He is currently pressing for funding in the 2009 budget, and hopes to have his office be operational by the beginning of 2009.

17. (C) Ironically, Aboudrar, who as a youthful leftist activist was imprisoned for six years under Hassan II, judged that corruption has worsened in Morocco under Mohammed VI. An effort during the "Alternance" period at the end of Hassan II's reign, under socialist Prime Minister Youssoufi to tackle the problem was not followed up, and the more open atmosphere of the new reign led to a "recrudescence" of corruption. There is "no fear and no perception of risk," he suggested, as a result of the lack of enforcement. The resulting expansion of corruption, he said, is evident in the declining rankings Morocco has received on international rankings on corruption issues. He argued Morocco now needs a "pris de conscience" to come to grips with the problem. It has happened in some Ministries and areas, he judged, but fitfully, and with a lack of follow through. On learning that USAID has carried out its own work on corruption in Morocco, Aboudrar expressed great interest in USAID's ongoing assessment of the problem, and subsequent to the meeting

phoned to request a copy of the report prepared by USAID's contractor on the subject.

¶8. (C) In our meeting, Aboudrar stressed that he did not assume the position in order to serve as "window dressing," but because he believes he can make a difference. Subsequently, in his first press interview in the weekly "Telquel," he stressed his readiness to tackle all the key state institutions that are afflicted with the problem, including the army, while also highlighting his vision of how Moroccans should address the problem of petty corruption. He noted that he has "frequently paid the 400 MAD (50 USD) fine" for traffic violations, "and always offers to pay by check, even when this is rebuffed." His refusal to "grease the hand" in such instances is categoric, he explained, "since I find it humiliating to corrupt someone."

¶9. (C) Comment: Aboudrar is a thoughtful and perceptive observer of the Moroccan scene, whose earlier success in convincing the CGEM to address the corruption issue over the objections of a range of senior business leaders hints that he has the skill set to navigate the challenges of his new position. Aboudrar's estimation that corruption has increased is troubling, but his evident intention to fully utilize the "bully pulpit" his position offers is encouraging. As the commission stands up, there may be opportunities to assist its efforts in tackling this critical issue. End Comment.

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